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The role of Information Technology and Tourism in Ghana

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Abstract

The use of information technology (IT) in the tourism industry in Ghana has been a contributing factor that enhanced travelling to various tourism destinations by the use of websites to retrieve valuable and relevant information. Transportation and the simple experience of human instincts of the factual comprehension of tourism and the benefits it presents to the society as a whole needs information technology to make life easier for tourists. The direct impact of tourism on the economy of Ghana is a contributing phenomenon supported by the government. Considering the fact that Ghana was a center for slave trade and attracts many people from America, Europe and other parts of the world need the contribution of IT for tourists to obtain significant information about the sites they intend to visit. In our world today, tourism is enormously developed because of the help of the evolution of computer technology across the world. Computers have made it easy for people to communicate, travel and do business. Information technology has various types of advantages for the tourism industry in Ghana. It is used as a platform for tourism products to be sold, help travel agents to sell tourism destinations and removed the blocks that previously hindered customers from obtaining valuable information through the internet. With the availability of the internet now in most parts of Ghana, customers can make their own online bookings to various tourist destinations without the help of a third party such as the travel agents who dominated the tourism markets for many years. These current developments have assisted the customers to gain insight and power to make bookings of their wish to travel destinations of their choice across the world.

Key words: *information technology, tourist destinations in Ghana*

1. Introduction

The movement of people from one location to another is a fundamental human instinct. The revolution of information technology in Africa particularly Ghana has been of a paramount importance of tourism in the

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country. People can now go online and login to the internet to find information of tourist destination within the borders of Ghana and beyond. The fibber optic cable with a total capacity of 1.92 terabytes per second was made available on the west coast of Africa of which Ghana has enormously benefited. The cable brought open access to the internet in July, 2010. As a result of this tourism has become a massive phenomenon in Ghana that involved people from all over the world. Tourists can get access to detailed information about specific places they intend to visit such as information related to the geography of the tourist destination, the best time to visit, the types of facilities, accommodation, when people can visit a specific tourist site and when they can exit. According to (Aiello, 2012) information technology is part of everyday life for tourists seeking information to destinations of their wish across the globe. The evolution of the internet in Ghana has generated a special impact in tourism business and provided the easy means for customers and suppliers to interact through the use of social media such as the Facebook, Twitter and other important communication facilities (Pesonen, 2013).

Information technology and tourism are the most rapidly growing industries in the world (Kumar, 2012). A study conducted by (Zheng Xiang, 2009) disclosed that the internet is used by many people to acquire information by using search engines such as the Google and other great search engine websites. He also further explained that apart from using the information technology to search for information to get a good idea of tourist destinations customers' also use the internet for easy communication purposes such as selling and buying of products and services. Further studies conducted by (Sporrek, 2003; Sunny Hama, 2005) revealed that information technology was a self-service mechanism which tourist could freely use to look for cheaper airline tickets, book for hotel accommodation and travel at their desire dates without depending on any organization for a special support.

The introduction of information technology in the tourism industry in Ghana has accorded hopes and possibilities as a platform for sales of tourism products and services. This has led to the amendment of attitudes of customers and their manner of dealing with business issues (Bitner, 2002a; Brown, 2000b).Before the liberation of the internet in Africa and Ghana as a whole the interaction between customers and service providers such as the travel agents was the usual manner of doing business. These significant characteristics of face to face marketing have been replaced by the internet known as self-service information technologies (Dewar, 2001). Most customers now prefer to interact with computers to buy products online than to deal with travel agents who will charges commissions. The availability of the internet has kept travel companies on their toes daily trying to find solutions to keep their customers in other to stay on top of their businesses. Travel companies are becoming more innovative to keep up with the new and fast growing IT development in the tourism industry around the world. Staying awake of new technologies in the IT field enhances the gaining of insight on the IT programs that can help grow customer and travel companies' relations in the tourism industry. The use of information technology in the tourism industry has amended the strategy of tourist attraction, hotel reservation and flights reservation and reformed the cardinality of the tourism industry globally (Buhalis, 1998; Buhalis, 2003). Law and Jogaratman (2005) stated that computer technology is in the process of metamorphosing tourism products and services. He further went on to explain that as the computer technology processes, it will be hard to guide and manage business activities and competition intensively.

2. Literature Review

For many decades IT has promoted and amended the way business is directed in the tourism industry in the world (Ulrike Gretzel, 2010; Buhalis D. &., 2008).This change has caused a huge transformation in the tourism business activities. The availability of the internet in Ghana is changing the operational behaviour of tourism in the country (Buhalis, 2003; Buhalis and Law, 2008; Emmer et al., 1993; O'Connor, 1999) The quick process of developing information technology in the tourism industry has been of significant help to many researchers stated by (Leung and Law, 2005, 2007).The growing of the internet usage in Ghana has increased growth in the tourism industry for the past decade. This has reduced costs and improved the quality of tourism products where customers can go online and have access to tourist destinations, view photographs of locations and make a

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decision as to which destination to visit (Law et al., 2009) Websites services and IT applications in the tourism industry helps to accelerate operations in the various tourism companies by assisting customers to find the correct products, services and to attract potential tourist. The wireless resources such as the Wi-Fi and the WiMAX play an important role by making it easy for organizations to sell tourism brands and create comparative and competitive advantages over their rivals. Kotler and Keller (2006) went on that travel agents need to establish and assemble different types of markets needed by potential tourists so that market segmentation can be made to target these groups with their special purchasing needs of tourism products. They further elucidated that customers can be portioned according to their descriptive behaviour and by so doing tourism products can properly managed with the help of the internet.

Tourism customers differ in ages genders, wealth and nations they come from.it is therefore obvious that these tourist may have a distinct life style and may search for different tourism products according to their needs, taste and life style (Kim, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007; Hallab & Gursoy, 2006). With such perceptions about customers in mind, it is important to display products that will attract them. Because of the availability of the internet tourist may prefer to go online to search for potential destinations to tour while others may like to use the travel agents because of trust and long tine established relationships (Cheyne, Downes, & Legg, 2006; Kozak (2007). Travellers from about 10 countries wishing to visit Ghana may need differences sources of information to make sure their travelling plans to the country is accurate. Information online can be deceptive because of the illegal activities on the internet such as hacking and provision of wrong information to attract tourists. Customers therefore find it preferable to contact travel agents to make sure they select the right destination products to prevent being at risk (Lehto, Kim, & Morrison, 2006).When customers look for cheaper prices on the internet to hotel reservation and tickets to tourist destination, the internet and the websites of travel organization could be the most suitable places (Law, Chan & Goh, 2007).The internet search engines are very useful in helping tourists to obtain valuable information about tourism destinations for example google, yahoo and other search engines (Ho & Liu, 2005).The google search engine is considered by many customers as the best in finding of important information (Law & Huang,2006).The use of search engines for searching purpose are very important but customers need to know the key words in order to be able to search for the information they are looking for (Pan, Litvin, & O'Donnell, 2007). A study conducted (Pan &Fesenmaier, 2006) explained that knowing the key words to a search makes life easy on the internet and the right information can be obtained without difficulties than a customer who lacks the right keywords to search for information. The wireless technology in mobile phone, IPad and other mobile equipment have recently played a great role in Ghana's tourism provision of valuable data to customers from various geographical spots (Buhalis & Law,2008).Mobile equipment's according to Fuchs, and Höpken (2007) explained that apart from mobile phones and IPad making communication and research easy to collect facts and knowledge, they can also be used as a guide for tourist across the globe. The internet worth a great deal as a tool for tourist, potential customers and suppliers around the world to share information, purchase tourism products, get fast services online and to rapidly receive information (Pesonen,2013) among customers. Tourism is a potential job creator and plays a profound role in the development of the economy in many countries most especially in the developing countries (Briedenhann and Wickens, 2004) like Ghana and West Africa as a whole. Information technology is regarded as the most useful tool for customers and suppliers to channel their communications and also search for valuable information on the internet (Law et al., 2010)

3.   The fusion of IT search engines and tourism in Ghana

Information technology and tourism existed many years in the developed world but in Ghana this process is just starting. The people of Ghana are hoping that the introduction of the information technology as a new technology in the tourism industry will be beneficial to the economy, organizations, and the tourism sector that can lead to improve human life effectively (Neumann, 1994).Tourists always want to get information online as it is easy and free. The obtaining of online data or information and the attitude of customers is important to take into consideration when websites are designed to target tourism products. Exploring the role of information

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technology in the tourism industry according to Jeong et al. (2003) the security of a website is important to customers in order to complete their transaction. The government of Ghana is very concerned about accurate information on Web sites across the country to avoid scams and fraud as the internet is still young in all the 10 regions. The government is trying to create a platform for customers to purchase tourism products online without any fear of fraud. The travel and tourism industry in Accra, Ghana is therefore informed to make sure of data security to customers. Hotel management has to think between the distinction of what customers are looking for in a website and what the website offers. It is important to keep a website design layout with attractive features and eye catching features that will attract potential customers. The user interface should not be complex as this may drive customers away. The content should contain useful information that make customers keep coming on it to look for information. All the important tourist sites in Ghana should be on the website, hotels for accommodations in all the 10 regions and other valuable information related to the tourism and the contribution of information technology (Dube´ et al., 2003). Adopting to information technology is expected to enhance efficiency, reduce cost and improve the quality of service in the tourism industry (Law et al., 2009).With the help of IT daily managerial and operational issues can be easily solved (Leung and Law, 2005).Using the internet to sell tourism product is not very expensive. Training programs can be organized to upgrade employees' knowledge about little technicalities such as training on multimedia programs, graphic design, photos, videos, animations and other basic elements such as the sound and text Clemenz et al. (2000).A study was conducted by Ham et al. (2008) to find out the reactions of employees to the change to information technology and the result was positive and encouraging. Employees had the desire for change and wish to adapt to information technology and a similar empirical study was carried out in Ghana by previous researcher indicated that Ghanaian embraced the use of IT. According to Jeong et al. (2003) information on the internet is very important to influence customers' decision to purchase tourism products online and that it is significant to remove doubts and the fear of fraud to enable trust prevail between a website and a customer. By this method customer information requirements will be satisfied. He further explained that satisfaction and trust of a website leads to huge transactions from customers and that generates profits.

4. Tourism destinations and expectation

Ghana is a small country and has a population of 25 million people. The country is made up of 10 regions and each region differs in culture, food, festivals and customs. The use of information technology has made it easy for tourist destination to be accessed in all the regions. Although Ghana has no special tourist attractions like Macaw in China, London eye at the United Kingdom and Eiffel tower in France, the country has a unique beauty of castles, beaches, lakes, museums and a rich history that attracts tourism every year (Bruner, 1996). Keller and Kotler (2006) explained that in other for tourism products and services to be effectively market through the use of IT, it will be important to recognize and profile a target group of buyers who are different in their preferential needs. By this way a market or more can be first-rated as a segment to target profitability. With the ideology about this research in mind, Ghana tourism has used the IT technologies to spread information about the country's tourist destination sites on the internet. The investment of Information technology in Ghana tourism has a played a very significant role in the industry. Tourists with the interest to visit Ghana can get all the rightful information on the internet before deciding on their trips. The internet has made Ghana preferable tourist destination in Africa. The expectation of tourists around the world depends on information and how the destination is market to tourists. In the case of Ghana, most of the tourist destinations are sold on the internet as a modern method of attracting tourists. It is therefore very important to fulfil tourist expectation and motivation in order to stay in business. The tourism industry in Ghana monitor websites to make certain accurate information is available for tourists. Correct information and satisfaction of tourist expectation are the dominant factors that lead to business prosperity in the tourism environment in the country.

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5. Methodology

Qualitative research method was used to collect data for this study. Questionnaire was set and used to interview employees from the tourism industry such as five star hotels, four star hotel, three and 2 star hotels respectively, managers in tourist organizations, information technologist, knowledge management personal, Computer scientists and travel agents across the city of Accra in Ghana. Permission was obtained in each of the above stated organizations before the questionnaire were distributed directly to the respondents. Each organization selected one employee to distribute and collect the data so there was an issue of selection bias. This could have been reduced if the researcher was allowed to distribute the questionnaire directly to the employees. The justification for the research was explained and the interviews were conducted from break periods of the respondents for a time lag of three months (June, July and August, 2013).The respondents were familiar with the role information technology plays in the tourism industry in Ghana and other parts of the world. Confidentiality was assured to the groups and that only the finally outcome of the research was going to be shared with the top level management of each of the organizations stated above. The overall number of questionnaires was 250 but only 150 were retrieved. The participation was voluntary and employee were not oblige to complete the questionnaire if they did not want.Podsakof et al.(2003) common method of bias was developed from the common rating such as item wise. Common bias method should be avoided or put in check on the empirical studies in order to prevent the size of potential threads of relationship among variables. Other empirical studies conducted on the solution to common bias together with Podsak of et al.(2003) , Haar (2004), karatape (2011) and way et al.(2010) were of the same view with Podsakot that a solution should be found for common bias methods in research studies. The questionnaire that were used for this study also included the profile of the respondents such as their gender,age,occupation, educational level and their marital status as control variables

The findings

The study revealed that information technology has been of tremendous help to tourism in Ghana. The tourism of non-resident visitors has been on the increase despite the world economic hardships. The help of information technology in the tourism sector has seen a growth of 6% according to statistics obtained from Ghana tourism authority (2012).Most of the tourist were from scattered parts of the country such as friends and relatives visiting, Ghanaians visiting from abroad with friends, African Americans visiting Ghana to look for their ancestral roots, Europeans, Americans and other nationals come to Ghana on visit find information about tourism destination in Ghana. Information technology is used as a tool to market Ghana as a suitable tourist destination. The use of information technology has attracted tourist across the globe to visit Ghana as a former center for slave trade.

The research limitation and implication

The growing rate on internet in Ghana is very fast and the tourism industry can now sell their products and services directly to tourists and tourists' operators. The tourism industry in Ghana has adopted information technology because its depends on the supply and exchange of information in particular to the production and distribution of data. Tourism as an information rigorous industry has undergone a radical modern changes in the country. Each day numerous opportunities are discovered in all parts of the ten regions of the Ghana through the use of Information technology. However the extreme to which this development of information technology continues may have severe implications for the industry such as the manipulation of information to attract tourists. Frost (2004) stated that arrival of information technology has changed the previous way of doing business with customers in the tourism industry. The interaction with tourism products and services through the internet with customers has become more transparent than ever. Travel agents are no longer under control or the final decision makers in tourist and tourism products. The by passing of travel agents to sell tourism directly

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through the internet has created chaos in the developing world. As prices of products and services play a bold role in all business, the tourism industry is experiencing the same (Bennett & Lai, 2005).Customers prefer to buy directly from internet without pay commission to the travel agencies. By these methods jobs are reduced in the travel agencies as they depend on the commissions they make to pay their employees. The study was only limited to Ghana as a tourist destination in the West African diaspora. Further future studies should be conducted about the disadvantages and advantages of direct selling of tourism products to customer through the internet. The use of information technology reduces cost, speeds up the transfer of information and enlarges the involvement of customers in the process transactions control.

Discussion and conclusion

Information technology (IT) presence in the tourism industry in Ghana has been a contributing factor that enhanced travelling to various tourism destinations. The availability websites to retrieve relevant information has played an important role in the tourism industry in Ghana. The simple experience of human instincts of the factual comprehension of tourism and the benefits it offers to the society as a whole needs information technology to make life easier. The direct impact of tourism on the economy of Ghana is a contributing phenomenon supported by the government. Considering the fact that Ghana was a center for slave trade and attracts many people from the America, Europe and other parts of the world need the contribution of IT to obtain significant information about the sites they intend to visit. In our world today, tourism is enormously developed because of the help of the evolution of computer technology across the world. Information Technology has made it easy for people to communicate, travel and do business. Information technology has various types of advantages for the tourism industry in Ghana. It is used as a platform for tourism products to be sold, help travel agents to sell tourism destinations and removed the blocks that previously hindered customers from obtaining valuable information through the internet. With the availability of the internet now in most parts of Ghana, customers can make their own online bookings to various tourist destinations without the help of a third party such as the travel agents who dominated the tourism markets for many years. These current developments have assisted the customers to gain insight and power to make bookings of their wish to travel destinations of their choice across the world.

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